

MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

Virtual programme accompanying the exhibition *John Heartfield – Photography plus Dynamite* at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2 June – 23 August 2020

The Screen Shared Live

Doreen Mende



1 – Protest banner, “Silent Demo” against racism, 6 June 2020, Alexanderplatz, Berlin. © Doreen Mende

In her essay “Faces as Commons,” American political scientist Jodi Dean writes about how the exorbitant influence of images on mass-media digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter creates a “secondary visuality.”¹ Meta-data, “likes” and clicks, algorithmic calculations and a sort of data-behaviourism (Antoinette Rouvroy) contribute significantly to this secondary visuality, which only becomes visible – not as an image, but as data – when we look past the surface image. It makes the specificities of an individual image (its “primary visuality”) disappear. Dean contextualises her thoughts in the mechanisms of what she calls “communicative capitalism,” which transforms the knowledge of a specific image into capital in the form of generic data. “Secondary visuality” can hardly be visualised itself, but it is easily described: 6 June 2020, around 4:15 PM, Alexanderplatz, Berlin. The “Silent Demo” against racism in Berlin has been going on for over two hours, while hundreds of thousands more people demonstrate against fascism, police brutality and injustice around the world. Things are starting to wind down. Because there are so many people, it takes time for them all to reach the metro station (ill. 1).

Some of them still carry their posters in hand, while others are already reaching for their smartphones even though they are still among their peers. During the train ride they are already looking at the photographs they just took of protest banners bearing slogans like “No Justice No Peace” or “White Silence is Violence”, while another poster shows an exceptional montage of about twelve portraits of different black feminist thinkers, such as Maya Angelou, May Ayim, Angela Y. Davis, Audre Lorde, Solange Knowles, Toni Morrison, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and others. If the protest footage wasn’t already livestreamed in real time, the photos of the banners will now quickly be edited, tagged and uploaded on various social media platforms before it’s time to change trains. Many participants, especially younger people, are still heading away from the protest in all directions. But they are no longer uploading their own photographs; instead, they are scrolling through the flood of images that has just been uploaded. Often with thumbs that scroll adeptly through the live newsfeed or keep swiping away until an individual image seems to completely disappear into the “communicative form”. In reference to this “circulatory capacity” of an image as crowd, Jodi Dean writes: “This new visualism is not just a matter of advertising, television, brands, mainstream media and the like. It characterizes one-to-one, one-to-few, one-to-many, few-to-many, many-to-few, and many-to-many communication. Social media and texting rely on images of all sorts – emojis, photos, videos, memes – deploying them in multiple combinations. *We live montage.*” [my emphasis] Jodi Dean sees an opportunity for countering the iconic treasured portrait with a *visual common*, or visual commonality, in the culture of excessive selfies. In the case of the “Silent Demo” and how it pertains to this topic: Dean (a self-professed communist) promises a “power of images [that] comes from the crowd [or centers] ... the face as a crowd” and emphasises the necessity for collectivity and common good, instead of letting a specific individual image become a logo or making a single portrait into the icon of a revolutionary situation.

We know that the concept of the image montage was developed by “women cinema workers”² such as Esfir Shub in the Soviet Union during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. It’s also no coincidence that the communist resistance against a strengthening Nazi Germany in the 1930s coincided with the development of photomontage as political praxis as we have seen it used by John Heartfield (ill. 2).



2 – John Heartfield, *Use Photo as a Weapon* (Self-Portrait with Police Commissioner Zörgiebel), 1929. © The Heartfield Community of Heirs / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2020, Akademie der Künste, Berlin

Making a direct contrast between at least two images appears to be the easiest, as well as the most effective, method to create a visual declaration of resistance. Montaging one image into another technically takes little to no time. You simply take a pair of scissors to Karl Zörgiebel’s throat (he was police commissioner of Berlin during the *Blutmai* or “bloody May,” in May 1929 – several days of rioting by supporters of the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) that ended in violent clashes with police). Here, the montage method corresponds to the temporality of resistance in the streets or in the factory, as though the time between the images creates a space for urgency to be fully expressed. By the mid-1990s, Harun Farocki had already developed the idea of “soft montage” in works such as *Schnittstelle* (Interface)³ to do justice to the growing complexity of the visual realm. Images are not just images: they are extracts, comments, forms of communication, meta-data, data streams or even, in the best-case scenario, a visual commonality. Farocki’s “soft montage” is an answer to this situation: “I say ‘soft montage’ because it’s about a complex relationship, not just oppositions and similarities.”⁴ In the short video essay *Interface 2.0*, filmmaker and critic Kevin B. Lee creates a wonderful update of Farocki’s *Schnittstelle* that reflects and comments on the digitisation of this work using digital editing tools.⁵ (ill. 3–4)

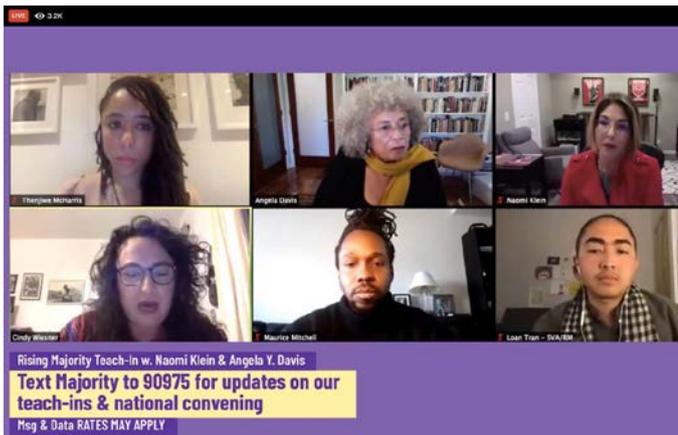


3 – Harun Farocki, *Interface*, 1995, 23 mins. © Harun Farocki GbR and Generali Foundation Collection – Permanent Loan to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. Photo: Werner Kaligofsky

How can we connect the emancipatory pedagogic aspects found in montaged images to the image as crowd *cum* data stream in real time? Has montage become obsolete in the age of computer-generated images (CGI), as Alexander Galloway speculates in *Gaming: Essays on Algorhythmic Cultures*?⁶ In his observations on CGI, Galloway develops the concept of the “actionable object,” which provokes certain actions or reactions in an associated but non-traceable realm via “likes,” clicks or other tactile techno-touches. In the age of mass-media computer navigation, the image is even less representative of reality than film or the photograph ever was. Rather, Farocki points out that the computer-generated images we interact with every day on Google maps, various newsfeeds, social media or in video games on smartphones or computer screens mark the image’s ruling class status in the 21st century. Regarding this computer-controlled navigation, I want to call this “actionable image” (Farocki) a *navigational image*. In this context montage has certainly not become obsolete. We should however try to understand how the *navigational image* withdraws from the sovereignty of the frame, and why its politicisation can’t stop at a strict opposition or contrast between images. There is another example that helps to illustrate this line of thinking: On 3 April, 2020, a teach-in took place featuring the political activist, philosopher and author Angela Y. Davis and the social activist, author and filmmaker Naomi Klein. It was broadcast live, in real time, from their home computers at 1 o’clock in the morning, Berlin time. At the invitation of the prison abolitionist Thenjiwe McHarris,⁷ they discussed the COVID-19 crisis (ill. 5).



4 – Kevin B. Lee, *Interface 2.0*, 2012, 8 mins. © Kevin B. Lee



5 – Angela Y. Davis and Naomi Klein, Teach-in, “Movement Building in the Time of the Covid-19 Crisis. A Left feminist perspective on 21st century racial capitalism in this moment”, 3 April 2020.
© The Rising Majority

Davis and Klein began with the political demand for “transformative visions of structural change” in this global crisis, while Thenijwe McHarreis, from The Rising Majority, opened the teach-in. Using a link and a password, attendees could log into a virtual classroom that spanned across hundreds of apartments on multiple continents. The split screen of livestreams, webinars or departmental meetings function similarly to a “soft montage,” but not just between edited images: this shared screen edits in real time, as if our desktops are the director’s editing table during the livestream. In a present defined by the coronavirus pandemic, the work from home imperative will likely become another chapter in the neo-liberalisation of education implemented in the name of Cyberlearn, Moodle, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Whereby, BigBlueButton, Skype or Jitsi Meet. Although Davis and Klein state that the left is “in a better position in this crisis” than it was in 2008/09, we should be searching for visual imaginary just as urgently as before. While “essential” workers ensure that the #stayathome class has food, electricity, water, etc., active participants in the production of visual cultures should be researching forms and methods of articulation in order to be prepared “to hit the ground running when we’re finally able to be in contact with each other in person” again (Naomi Klein) in the classroom, in exhibition spaces, on the street ...when the navigational image can’t be restricted to its communicative ability, but must be able to generate collectivity in real time.

Translated from German by Moira Barrett

- 1 Jodi Dean. “Faces as Commons. The Secondary Visuality of Communicative Capitalism,” *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*, 31 December, 2016, <https://onlineopen.org/faces-as-commons>, accessed 10 June 2020
- 2 Esfir Shub invented the term Монтажница (montazhnitsa) for herself and her female colleagues to describe women filmmakers’ tasks at the editing table; see Alla Gadassik, “Ésfir’ Shub on Women in the Editing Room: ‘The Work of *Montazhnitsy*’” (1927), in *Apparatus: Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe 6* (2018)
- 3 Harun Farocki, *Interface*, 1995, 23 mins
- 4 Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki, *Von Godard sprechen*, Doreen Mende (ed.), Cologne, 2018 [= Harun Farocki, *Schriften*. Band 2], p. 160; here in translation. Farocki did not talk about “soft montage” until later.
- 5 Kevin B. Lee, *Interface 2.0*, 2012, 8 mins
- 6 Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Cultures*, Minneapolis and London, 2006
- 7 Angela Y. Davis and Naomi Klein, 3 April 2020, 1:00 am CET, Teach-In, “Movement Building in the Time of the Covid-19 Crisis. A Left feminist perspective on 21st century racial capitalism in this moment,” organised by therisingmajority.com